

WASHINGTON – The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Kirk amendment to the Beach Protection Act (H.R. 2537) last night that would update mercury monitoring in the Great Lakes, the source of drinking water for more than 30 million Americans. The amendment requires the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency to update existing monitoring protocols and develop new testing recommendations for mercury in Great Lakes coastal waters, sediment and fish.

“I have a major concern about mercury pollution and its effect on families living near the Great Lakes,” Congressman Kirk said. “Our region is particularly vulnerable, with 36 percent of all mercury emissions generated in the Great Lakes area. We need to protect young mothers and the 300,000 American babies who are at risk for mercury poisoning and birth defects. By updating our monitoring procedures, we can better address the growing mercury accumulation in our drinking water.”

“I applaud the actions of the gentleman from Illinois to bring greater attention to the threat of mercury contamination,” said Laura Richardson (D-Calif.) of the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee. “Given what we have known about the health impacts of mercury, a mercury advisory in today's day and age is wrong and it needs to be addressed.”

Coal-fired power plants are the leading cause of mercury deposits in the Great Lakes, but recent scientific reports estimate that up to 36 percent of the mercury settling into U.S. ground soil and waterways comes from Asia and in particular, China. China is home to 20 of the world's 30 most polluted cities, and their extensive coal use is affecting global air and water quality. According to the Congressional Research Service, Great Lakes water quality rules were initially adopted in 1995 and have not been completely overhauled to reflect new mercury pollution trends.

The text of the amendment is below.

SEC. 11. MONITORING PROTOCOL FOR MERCURY.

(a) REVIEW AND UPDATE OF EXISTING MONITORING PROTOCOLS.—The Administrator of

the Environmental Protection Agency shall review and update existing monitoring protocols as necessary for mercury affecting the coastal recreation waters of the Great Lakes.

(b) RECOMMENDATIONS ON TESTING.—In carrying out subsection (a), the Administrator shall develop updated recommendations on testing for the presence of mercury affecting the coastal recreation waters of the Great Lakes, including the presence of mercury in Great Lakes sediment and fish tissue.

(c) PUBLICATION OF WATER QUALITY CRITERIA.—Nothing in this section shall delay the schedule for publication of new or revised water quality criteria as required by section 304(a)(9) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1314(a)(9)).

(d) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out this section.